

Local builder's patriotism spawns vets memorial

When ground is broken in Columbia Park this Saturday at 11 a.m. for the Regional Veterans Memorial, it will be largely because retired construction contractor Tom McMillin wouldn't let go of the idea — even while he was recuperating from a heart attack and a subsequent stroke.

McMillin has lived in the Tri-Cities for most of his life, having arrived from Green Bay, Wis., in 1943. He graduated from Richland's Columbia High School in 1948 and attended Gonzaga University. He served in the U.S. Navy Seabees during the Korean Conflict, started in heavy construction with Bechtel Corp., and established his own construction business here in 1960. Before retiring in 1990, he built many large facilities for Hanford, Washington State University Tri-Cities and what is now the Columbia Generating Station, as well as O'Sullivan Dam and his favorite, the Columbia Park Duck Pond.



This architect's drawing of the planned Regional Veterans Memorial was furnished by Meier Enterprises of Kennewick, which donated design and engineering services for the project.

McMillin and his wife Joyce, a Bechtel Hanford manager, have worked tirelessly to acquire the huge granite monoliths that will be an integral part of the Regional Veterans Memorial, and to rally community leaders and local companies behind the effort — many of whom are donating services worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. George Grant Construction, Lampson International, Central Premix, Ray Poland Sons, A&B Asphalt and others have agreed to participate in the project. And, because the memorial will be on soft ground where the water table is high, it will rest on huge steel pilings to be driven by Bergerson Construction of Oregon, a company that is doing some river work in the Tri-Cities and wants to be a part of the project.

A 40-foot column and 10 smaller ones — 60 tons of granite — will be the focal point of the impressive monument, to be built between the traffic circle and the river at the main park entrance.

A Hanford legacy

The granite, excessed by the Department of Energy for the memorial, has a history that goes back to Cold War-era Hanford. It was quarried in California's Sierra Nevada, acquired by the government in 1968, and shipped to Minnesota where the slabs were polished to precision tolerances. They were brought to Hanford's 306 Building to be used as surface plates for precise measurements using laser interferometers, and they were used there until 1990.

When McMillin first saw the stones, they were in a storage area in Richland. DOE put them in its Asset Recovery Program about three years ago and started looking for a buyer. But neither DOE nor TARC — the Tri-City Industrial Development Council's asset-reinvestment organization that turns Hanford assets into local jobs — could find a buyer willing to move them.

"The largest of these monoliths would be nearly impossible to quarry now," McMillin said. "It would cost \$200,000 or more."

In spite of the failed attempts to sell the surface plates, an excruciating 10 months went by — a period in

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which McMillin suffered a heart attack and negotiated from his hospital bed — before he could get his hands on the granite slabs. Eventually, he said, “I was able to convince everyone that I could bring together former peers in the heavy-construction sector to provide the concrete, cranes, loaders, dozers and craft skills and, because of their commitment to the community, to donate an estimated \$200,000 worth of in-kind work and supplies.”

Community support

McMillin's Navy Seabee instincts kicked in again when he learned that the Columbia River Exhibition of History, Science and Technology owned seven smaller stones he needed for an “honor roll” of local veterans. He partnered with CREHST museum manager Gwen Leth to acquire the stones for the memorial.

Tom and Joyce McMillin organized the Veterans Memorial Committee last year. They formed a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation to raise the needed funds, and recruited a virtual “Who's Who” of Tri-Cities community leaders to serve on its board. Meier Enterprises donated its services for the design, which expanded on Joyce McMillin's “plaza” concept with the vertical granite columns.

The next task was dealing with local governments to secure a location. Several places in Richland and Kennewick were considered before the Columbia Park site was chosen and offered by the City of Kennewick and Walla Walla District Corp of Engineers Commander Col. Ed Kertis, Jr.

“Everyone involved with this has been just great,” said John Umbarger of Fluor Hanford, a board member of the Veterans Memorial Committee. “The Kennewick Parks Commission, city manager Bob Kelly, the Planning Commission, the City Council, Mayor Jim Beaver, CREHST, DOE-RL manager Keith Klein and his staff, Darby Stapp of PNNL, who did the archaeological study for the shoreline permit, all the building contractors and many others — they've all come together to make this happen. They're the A Team!”

The Kennewick Parks Commission, as it turns out, had been reserving that spot by the river for something that would serve as a focal point for the park entrance, and the Regional Veterans Memorial will certainly accomplish that. The primary column of the memorial will be the largest freestanding piece of granite in the U.S. The memorial will also be a “draw” for veterans and tourists from outside our area.

Retired Army Major General Bob Frix will deliver the keynote address at the ground-breaking ceremony on May 17, which is Armed Forces Day. After the groundbreaking, the heavy work of driving the piles, placing the foundation and erecting the granite will begin. McMillin expects to have the memorial completed by Veterans Day next November.

Funds are still needed for parts of the memorial plaza, including flagpoles, benches, bronze plaques and lighting. Donations may be sent to the Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 2265, Richland, WA 99352. For information, call 372-1551. ■

The Regional Veterans Memorial plaque will read as follows:

- In honor of those who served to forge the heritage of the United States Armed Forces.
- In tribute to those who perished to provide peace and security for our nation.
- In gratitude to those serving.